Gender in Discussion Classes at a Japanese University

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ABSTRACT

The following paper presents a case study of the English discussion center at a private university in central Tokyo. The lessons of two instructors from the center, Luke and Leia, were observed and followed up with formal interviews to investigate the role of gender on student interaction in English discussion classes. The findings from the observations and interviews were triangulated with a set of 23 recordings, which involved a total of 61 students engaged in 16-minute discussions on the topic of gender in Japanese society. Due to a dearth of literature regarding the influence of gender on interaction in the second language classroom, the investigation intended to deliberate in what ways, if any, student gender influences interaction in English discussion and in what ways, if any, student perspectives on gender manifest themselves in English discussion lessons.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The initial focus of gender-based L2 research concerned what makes men and women different. This attitude stemmed from the structural linguistics model employed by researchers since the 1970s (Cornwell, Simon-Maeda, & Churchill, 2007), and reflected several decades of research on gender that was situated in the *difference paradigm* (Cameron, 2005). Research under the difference paradigm, which considers gender only in terms of differences, led to conclusions such as those proclaiming that men refer to object properties and impersonal topics more than women, while women are more likely to use words related to psychological and social processes (Newman, Groom, Handelman, Peenebaker, 2008). A study of traits that are characterized as differentiating language use by gender in American culture revealed that women are thought to be more collaborative than competitive in communicative style, to hedge more, to use more diminutives and euphemisms, and to use better grammar and less colloquialisms than men (Lakoff, 1990). However, women were also thought to be more prone to interruption, more unlikely to commit to an opinion, and less likely to introduce successful topics. L2 research has also suggested that women might acquire language in a different manner than men (Green & Oxford, 1995). For instance, studies have shown that women are statistically more likely to utilize language learning strategies than men in Japan (Watanabe, 1990), China (Sy, 1994), Croatia (Božinović & Sindik, 2011), Turkey (Kayaoğlu, 2012) and Puerto Rico (Green & Oxford, 1995).

The focus of L2 gender research toward differences between the sexes in relation to learning styles, amount of talk, type of talk, and test performance was labelled as regrettable, conservative, and counterproductive by Sunderland (2000a), who argued that individual agency and the scope for resistance to such archetypes has been neglected (Sunderland, 2000b). In more recent research, gender has been considered as a complex system of context dependent discursive practices and social relations, which is just one of a group of social identity facets that contribute to language learning experiences and results (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004). This belief is supported by research in the diversity paradigm (Cameron, 2005), which suggests that differences observed in language use by men and women might be context dependent and explainable locally rather than by gender.

In accordance with the diversity paradigm, the commonly-held impression of female language learners outperforming men at foreign languages might in actuality be a fallacy (Sunderland, 2000b), interpretable as a context-based difference as opposed to a difference based on gender. For example, despite past research indicating that women generally outperform men at English (Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2017), not all research suggests that female learners are

dominant at studying foreign languages. Some research revealed boys to outperform girls in vocabulary and listening tests (Boyle, 1987) and also modern language A-level examinations in the UK (Arnot, David, & Weiner, 1996), notwithstanding that four-times as many girls take the examinations (Thomas, 1990). Research at an Australian university (Bernat and Lloyd, 2007) also demonstrated that male and female EFL students held similar beliefs about language learning according to the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) (Horwitz, 1987), which questions students about language learning beliefs with regard to aptitude, difficulty, strategy use, motivation, and nature of language learning, thus providing more evidence for gender dissimilarities in language learning.

The supposed superior performance of female students in modern language examinations might be due to the nature of the test instruments used, although additional levels of complexity dampen the generalizability of these claims. Sunderland (2000b) presented three ways in which gender might influence language testing: the topic, the task, and the tester. First, girls perform better with texts on "female" topics, while boys outperform girls with "male" topics. Second, female students generally achieve higher scores on extended writing tasks, while boys score higher on tasks such as multiple-choice questions. Third, during oral tests, students potentially respond differently depending on the gender of interlocutor, and testers might grade male or female test takers preferably. Sunderland also described the relationship between gender and language study as being more complex and more specific than earlier research suggested. The relationship is more complex due to the fact that it interacts with other aspects of identity and is more specific because the conclusions made by research seem far from being generalizable among varying contexts.

Such conclusions have led to a move away from the identification of gender specific language use towards research in the diversity paradigm, which locates differences between men and women more locally (Cameron, 2005). Research produced under the diversity paradigm supports a social constructionist approach towards describing the relationship between men and women, which posits that any linguistic differences perceived can be explained by the communicative contexts and specific tasks in which learners engage, with gender being defined as a continuously constructed variable dependent on social and local influences (Pavlenko, 2001). An example of this is the higher levels of English proficiency achieved by Asian men in Britain when compared with Asian women, which has been accounted for by the fact that their employment involves contact with L1 English speakers, while Asian women frequently spend more time at home and socializing with non-L1 English speaking family members and friends (Ellis, 2008). Similar patterns have been found for the Latino community in California (Rockhill, 1993) and for Portuguese factory workers in Canada (Goldstein, 1997).

The paucity of research undertaken on gender in language education was also lamented by Sunderland (2000b), who rallied for a greater number of language-classroom-specific studies. One of the few studies that investigated the role of gender in relation to foreign language learning was conducted by Kobayashi (2002), in which the results of a large-scale questionnaire completed by 555 Japanese students (313 female, 242 male) from two high schools in central Japan were analyzed to account for female students' more positive attitude towards learning English in comparison with male students. Kobayashi clearly conveyed her social constructionist belief in gender research and attempted to justify the discrepancies between the results of the male and female students through Japanese social issues as opposed to any cultural, psychological, or physical differences. Kobayashi analyzed the results in terms of Japanese societal issues, consisting of gendered academic and career choices, lack of future perspectives and critical thinking, the marginalization of Japanese woman, and the consequent freedom that many Japanese women find overseas. From the analysis, Kobayashi concluded that Japanese society is responsible for women demonstrating a more positive attitude towards language learning than men. The

reasons listed for the discrepancy included the attitude perpetuated by Japanese schools regarding English as a subject for women, Japanese schools' lack of career and life planning for students, advertising by the language industry selling English proficiency to women as a tool for enhancement, and the lack of constraints upon women who chose to leave Japanese society. These conclusions were supported by Nagatomo (2012), who reported that Japanese women studying in higher educational contexts were more likely to have low career aspirations, and study subjects considered feminine, such as English, because they were not confident that they could compete with men for jobs in fields such as mathematics, a phenomenon described as the fear of success (Horner, 1972).

The majority of gender-based second-language research has focused upon the measurement of affective variables, but interaction between students when engaged in the activity of speaking has largely been ignored. Research has suggested that female Japanese language students display higher levels of engagement (Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2017), intrinsic motivation, enjoyment, and a greater interest in foreign countries than males at elementary school (Carreira, 2011). This relationship has been shown to continue through to university, where female students have scored significantly higher on measurements of integrativeness (Mori & Gobel, 2006) and gender has engendered a dynamic effect on motivation, an effect that is dependent on the immediate context of the classroom (Kozaki & Ross, 2011). However, a gap exists in the literature regarding how these perceived differences between males and females affect the manner in which students engage in interaction in the language classroom. This is surprising because interaction has been identified by second language acquisition literature as being vital for developing language skills for decades. Interaction has been shown to facilitate L2 learning through negotiation of meaning (Long, 1981, 1996), pushed output, hypothesis testing, and fluency enhancement (Swain, 1995; Swain & Lapkin, 1995). Interaction has also been shown to provide opportunities to develop psycholinguistic processes such as noticing (Schmidt, 1990, 1993) and the development of procedural and automatized language knowledge (Anderson, 1983; de Bot, 1996; DeKeyser, 1997, 2007), and also to enable the induction of grammatical rules (Carroll, 2000; Tomasello, 2003). With the significance of interaction on second language development so well theorized, it is important for the effects of a variable such as gender, which is a part of any given classroom in any given context, to be investigated.

The annually-published collection of studies produced by instructors in the English discussion department at the university where this study is set has rarely featured investigations focusing on gender issues in the classroom, which aligns with Sunderland's (2000b) proclamation regarding the dearth of language-classroom-specific gender research. In five years of publishing, merely four studies from a total of 242 focused on gender. For instance, Mayo and Tegnell (2013) investigated the effect of gender in dyad communication and concluded that individual personality had a stronger influence on communication than gender, although male-male dyads were more likely to contain less serious responses. However, because of small sample sizes and a limited number of observations, the authors stated that these results should be treated with caution. Reid (2016) investigated whether or not gender had an effect on who begins discussions, postulating that men would be more likely to take the lead based upon previous research on gender in education (e.g., Clark & Trafford, 1995). However, Reid discovered that student ability was a much more salient factor than gender with regard to predictions of who would begin a discussion. When synthesized, the results imply that gender has less of an effect on English discussion lessons than ability and personality.

In conclusion, there is a wealth of research across academic disciplines proclaiming that differences between men and women exist, yet there is an equally convincing argument that such views are conservative, counterproductive, and simplistic interpretations of a vastly complex

concept. However, research on the effects of gender in the language learning classroom is sparse at best, and the findings are inconsistent, although it is fair to say that gender discrepancies found in classrooms are likely the result of social constructions dependent on the students in the classroom, the teacher, the lesson being taught, the attitude displayed to English by the actions of the institution where the classroom is situated, and indeed the greater societal attitudes towards the roles of men and women. The synthesis of these varying levels of influence make the study of how gender affects student interaction in the language classroom ripe for investigation through the use of qualitative research methods. In order to investigate the role of gender in a second language classroom, the following research questions were proposed:

1. In what ways, if any, does student gender influence interaction in English discussion?
2. In what ways, if any, do student perspectives on gender manifest themselves in English discussion lessons?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The main participants in this study were the discussion class students at a private university in central Tokyo. In total, 61 freshman students, 35 females and 25 males, aged between 18 and 20 were recorded discussing of the topic of gender across 12 separate lessons. These recordings provided a voice for the students. In addition, two instructors from the discussion center at said university took part in 30-minute interviews. Leia is a female instructor with two years of experience teaching in the discussion center and several years of experience teaching English Japan. Luke is a North American male with five years of experience teaching in the discusion center. Both participants could be considered representative of what Hatch (2002) referred to as *good informants*, in the sense that they had experience and knowledge of daily life in the English discussion class setting.

Data Collection Methods

Three types of data were collected for this study, consisting of student discussion recordings, instructor interviews, and instructor lesson observations. Student discussions were recorded in 12 different classes using Sony IC recorders, resulting in 23 recordings that totaled over six hours of footage and involved a total of 61 students in groups of between three and five students. The recordings were made in the eighth lesson of the second semester when the theme lesson was gender, which involved students preparing for and performing a 16-minute discussion that required the students to consider two questions: *Are men and women equal, at school, at work, and at home?* and *How could life be improved for men and women?* The final product for each of the 23 discussion recordings was a data-log that detailed what was said and at what point in the discussion it was said. Student interactions that were deemed pertinent for deeper analysis were transcribed in full.

The approach taken for the collection of the instructor interview data was that of a formal interview (Hatch, 2002), in which guiding questions were asked, followed by probing questions intended to dig deeper into the opinions of the interviewees. Both of the interviews lasted for approximately 30 minutes and were also recorded using a Sony IC recorder. Both interviews were transcribed in full for analysis. Due to time restrictions, I was only able to observe one class in person, which was Luke's final class of the semester. The observation of Leia's class was made from a video recording that was produced for a faculty development observation. Both observations involved the creation of set of handwritten field notes that were typed up in detail within hours of the observation ending.

Methods of Analysis

The three types of data were analyzed through the use of coding methods (Saldaña, 2013) and triangulated. Two types of elemental coding methods and two types of exploratory coding methods were utilized because they reflected my postpositivist position regarding data analysis in that they allow the data to drive the conclusions. From the elemental methods, *structural coding* and *descriptive coding* were employed. Structural coding entails the assignment of a topic of enquiry representing a specific research question to segments of data. Descriptive coding involves summarizing each block of data with a word or phrase relating to the topic. From the exploratory methods, *provisional coding* was employed. Provisional coding requires a list of codes predetermined from the researcher's experiences with the participants and data thus far. The lesson observation logs, instructor interview transcripts, and student discussion logs were all coded using these three methods and the resulting themes were triangulated to investigate the extent to which gender, and student beliefs regarding gender, affect interaction or behavior in the English discussion classroom.

PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

The results of the data analysis supported Sunderland's (2000b) claim that the commonly-held impression of female language learners outperforming men at foreign languages may be a fallacy, and failed to show any indication of female second-language students being more motivated to learn than their male counterparts (Kozaki & Ross, 2011; Mori & Gobel, 2006); however, subtle differences between the behavior of male and female learners were detected. In the following section, excerpts from the data illustrating two key themes are presented, which consist of the alpha role and the act of disagreeing, and the negative influence of parents.

The Alpha Role and the Act of Disagreeing

The first major theme that the data coding revealed was concerned with the *alpha role* in the discussion group. The alpha role term was interpreted by Luke as being bold enough to talk first in a discussion, and displaying little perturbation when dominating a discussion. Although there was no clear pattern suggesting that male students were more likely to initiate or take the alpha role, a subtle pattern emerged whereby female students seemed reluctant to directly disagree with male alphas but would restate their own contrasting opinion or challenge the alpha through the use of follow-up questions. The following data excerpt focuses on F29, F30, and M22, who were involved in a three-person, female dominated discussion about equality in Japanese homes.

F30: I think, there are many families, families share housework recently. But, I think the impressions that, woman do housework remains, so I think men and woman not equal at home.
F29: Yes.
M22: Ah, okay.
F29: Do you agree?
M22: Sorry, I disagree with you.
F29: Oh, okay.
M22: I think, er, in, natural world, all animal, er, man hunt.
F29: Er, yes.
M22: Hunt, the prey. And women, miss [*laughter*], women, raise their child. It is very natural.
F29: Ah, natural. So, you think, natural, animal, and er, human is same [*laughter*]?
M22: Yes. Same. So I think, men should work and women should housekeeping, is natural, so this, it is equal, I think.
F29: Ahh, okay. Very fresh idea.

F30: Can I ask a question?
M22: Yes.
F30: If you get married, you, do you want to, your wife, to do, should stay at home?
M22: Sorry, I can't imagine, this situation [*laughter*].
F29: Do you live, alone, for your life?
M22: Yeah. But, I think, I want to, I want to my wife, to stay at home, because, from my children viewpoint, mother is the very important, important, so, er, yeah. Always, er, stay with my children, I think.
F29: Can I ask something?
M22: Yeah.
F29: From the big children after, er, after take caring children's point of view, er, what's the advantages of mother stay at home all day.
M22: Errr. I think, one advantage is, er, man, concentrate, on his day, on his job.
F29: Ah, yes.
F30: Yes.
M22: It is very important. And man get high salary, and get good position, I think. Do you follow me?
F29: Yes.
F30: Yes.
M22: Okay. Is there anything to add?
F29: No.
F30: No.
F29: No.

In this excerpt, M22 displays several characteristics that suggest he is comfortable in the alpha role within this discussion group. First, he has no problem directly disagreeing with the shared opinion of F29 and F30. Second, he is one of only two males from the 26 recorded in this data set to brazenly support the traditional view of men working and women staying at home. Third, he is the only male student in this set of recordings to refer to his future wife and children with the possessive pronoun *my*. His attitude in this excerpt fits comfortably with the new biologism research (Cameron, 2009), in which dissimilarities between genders are biologically described in terms of psychological disposition, cognitive ability, and behavior, as opposed to being considered in socio-cultural terms.

Also, of interest in this excerpt are the indirect methods undertaken by the two female students when disagreeing with his opinion. By suggesting that men should work and women should stay at home M22 offers an argument in total opposition to the original statement agreed upon by F29 and F30, yet the two female students do not directly disagree with him. However, they show their disagreement through the use of three techniques. First, F29 makes light of his opinion and rephrases it as joke by stating *So, you think, natural, animal, and er, human is same* and then laughing at the idea before he has a chance to counter. Second, after M22 has repeated his belief, F29 uses sarcasm to ridicule his comments by labeling it a *Very fresh idea*. Finally, F29 and F30 ask a series of questions with the intent of challenging M22's opinion, such as *If you get married, you, do you want to, your wife, to do, should stay at home? And From the big children after, er, after take caring children's point of view, er, what's the advantages of mother stay at home all day?* All three of these methods imply that the female students disagree with M22's opinion, but they imply the disagreement indirectly.

The Negative Influence of Parents

The second major theme revealed by the data coding was the influence of parents in encouraging students to believe that inequality in society is something that cannot be changed and should not be challenged. In the following excerpt, F13 relays an anecdote of being sexually harassed in a train station at night and the surprising response of her father to the incident.

F14: How could life be improved?
F13: I mean, I think, for me, the sexual harassment is something that I want to be improved because,
F14: That is true.
F13: I was, wearing, like, a short skirt, and I was wearing black stockings, and I was like, I, I always go through the same route when I go home through Ikebukuro station, and I even, it was around eight o'clock and I was wearing a short skirt, so then and this, businessman guy came up to me and he was like, erm, cat-calling and stuff.
F14: Really.
F13: But I never got that, like, I've been walking for six months, but I think that's because I was wearing pants all the time, and never wore skirts, not never but like, it was never, like, a short skirt, so I think that has effect, on, like, er, I think men think it's okay for them to ask me, to cat-call, because I was wearing something provocative.
M10: Right.
F13: But that doesn't give them the right, but even my Dad was like, well, you were wearing something, provocative, but I'm just like,
F14: Yo, that is….
M10: What!
F14: …very traditional.
F13: Right. And it's like, but that doesn't give you, the men, the right to…
F14: Definitely.
F13: So, I think that, but I was surprised because, it never happened to me at all.
F14: I totally agree.
F13: But I was wearing. But I realize, oh, I was wearing pants all the time, so, but I was going through the same route, but. So, that.
F14: Maybe you were just unfortunate that,
F13: Yeah, I know [*laughter*].

In this excerpt, F13 seems unsurprisingly troubled by the fact that an older man felt it acceptable to cat-call her because she was wearing a short skirt. She displays an assertive attitude against such behavior, correctly claiming that her choice of attire does not give men the right to react in the way that the businessman in question did. However, the message delivered by her father suggests that F13 was responsible for the incident and F13's challenge to the status quo, where men can get away behaving in that way towards young women in society, is disregarded and trivialized thus reinforcing the belief that inequality in Japanese society cannot be changed and should not be challenged, which was a theme in several of the student discussions. The response from M10 and F14 is also surprising in that they express surprise at F13's father's traditional attitude, but not at the fact that their friend was sexually harassed in public, merely suggesting that she was unfortunate.

DISCUSSION

The following section expands upon the two themes presented above and triangulates the data excerpts with similar findings from the observations, interviews and student recordings, alongside examples from other studies where appropriate.

The alpha role was discussed by Luke in his interview when he suggested that male students are offered the opportunity to take the role initially in the semester, but female students will take the role if a male student is unwilling or incapable. As the student recordings were made half way through the second semester the alpha roles had presumably been already occupied in each group, so there was no evidence to support the assignment of the alpha role position. However, there was ample evidence in the data of both male and female students occupying the alpha role during discussions and in initiation of discussions. This supports the findings of Reid (2016) and Mayo and Tegenll (2013), who found individual personality to exert a greater effect on communication in a discussion group than gender.

There were, however, numerous incidents of indirect disagreeing behaviors, similar to those utilized by F29 and F30 in the second data excerpt, to suggest that this was not an isolated incident. Throughout the student discussion data, female students were more likely than males to disagree with other students, and when female students disagree, they are more likely to use an indirect method, whereas men are more likely to directly say *I disagree*. For example, in another discussion, a male student in a discussion group with three female students suggested that students at women's universities are unable to meet men and have relationships. The female students laughed at this idea, prompting the male to ask if they know of any students at women's universities with boyfriends, which is followed by a pause and then all three female students saying that they do. However, despite the male student presenting false information as fact, none of the female students directly disagreed with him.

To say that female students never directly disagree would, however, be fallacious. The female students in the discussion data did directly disagree, but were more likely to do so with another female student. For example, in another discussion consisting of two females and one male discussing university, when a female student claimed that men and women are not equal at university because circle leaders are usually men, the other female directly disagreed with her. Despite this disagreement, she implied an acceptance of gender inequality by reasoning that *of course, men is top of circle and women can't become top of circle* and suggests that because men pay when they go out for circle dinners, women are strong in *different positions*. This behavior is similar to that described by Sunderland (2000b) relating to the influence of gender on test taking. Sunderland suggested that student responses to oral tests were dependent on the gender of the interlocutor, while in the discussion class responses of female students when disagreeing could be dependent on the gender or alpha-role status of the interlocutor. Female responses in the student recordings could also have been dependent on the topic, which in this case was gender. Sunderland suggested that female students are more likely to outperform male students on topics that are considered "female". Without evidence from discussions on other subjects, this effect cannot be discounted.

This reluctance to directly disagree with male students even in the face of directly contrasting opinions or false information, and in the relative safety of an English discussion class at a liberal arts university where such behavior is being encouraged, does not bode well for them standing up against men in the workplace, where most students seem to agree that inequality is rife. It could be argued that the female students in the examples above achieved their goal of demonstrating their disagreement through indirect methods, however a number of the indirect disagreements involved groups of two or three female students subtly working together as team and relied on the male students' realization that they were being disagreed with. In the workplace

and in other out of class situations, relying on others to assist with disagreement or hoping that the message has been conveyed indirectly might not be as effective. The phenomena of female students being relatively quiet or reserved in comparison with male students has been suggested as being characteristic of a society in which men hold an advantage over women in terms of access to power (Fujimura-Fanselow, 1996). If this is true, it is not beyond reasoning that a reluctance to challenge these power issues at the classroom level in a relatively safe environment will ensure that the imbalance of power of endures.

On a more serious level, the seeming avoidance of confrontation intimated by indirect disagreement could be an indirect reason why Japan requires women's only trains in order to protect the women whose avoidance of confrontation spreads to such extreme situations as being faced with sexual harassment in public. Ó'Móchain (2006) proposed the existence of a social pressure in Japan that discourages the discussion of sexuality in certain public spheres. Although Ó'Móchain's use of the word the term sexuality did not relate to sexual harassment, it would be fair to assess that the existence of the women's only cars implies that the social pressure discouraging discussion also spreads to cover acts of sexual harassment. This point was alluded to in Luke's interview where he claimed to have heard male students dismissing the seriousness of sexual harassment by laughing about it and calling it "fun". This dismissal of the subject was also displayed in the third data excerpt in which F13's father dismissed his own daughter regarding her experience of sexual harassment, one of numerous examples of students' parents perpetuating the belief of gender inequality in Japanese society.

The student recordings contained many instances of parents or teachers encouraging behavior or thinking that upholds the divide between men and women. Earlier on in the discussion from which the above excerpt was taken, F13 stated that being a woman is a disadvantage when looking for jobs and that it is totally understandable because they are likely to want maternity leave at some point in their careers. This argument was frequently raised in student discussions and was always accepted as being practical. The opinion was also brought up by Leia who described maternity leave as being considered troublesome in Japanese companies for the reason that men usually have to do the work for the woman while she is absent. The acceptance of this by university students who have not experienced life in a Japanese workplace is potentially due to parental influence. For example, one student said that his father told him that men and women are not equal in the workplace and that the highest positions are all taken by men. Another student said that her mother, who was involved in recruitment, told her that companies do not want women workers because they have more problems than men. A number of female students also mentioned that their fathers refused to do housework and leave it for their daughters and wives. When these ideas were aired within the student discussions, they were always supported and never disagreed with or challenged.

The concept of student attitudes towards gender being shaped by their parents is not an original one and has been reported in developmental psychology research. From a young age, parental gender exerts a major influence on their children's sense of self and self-esteem in unexpected ways, with fathers being more responsible for their daughter's self-esteem and mothers being more responsible for their son's (Richards, Gitelson, Petersen, & Hartig, 1991). Parental gender role attitude has been hypothesized as having enduring effects on children's' attitudes towards gender as they develop into young adults (Cunningham, 2001), with parents who display an attitude towards gender equality more likely to raise children who hold the same egalitarian values (Witt, 1997). In a reversal of Witt's finding, the student discussion examples listed above suggest that parents who espouse a traditional attitude, in which inequality between genders is implied, seem more likely to raise children who are likely to accept such opinions as unchallengeable facts.

Parental influence was not the only source of negativity shaping student attitudes towards gender inequality, with teachers also playing a role, albeit to a lesser extent. In one discussion, a student talked about how her high school teacher encouraged the female students to apply to girls-only universities in order to avoid being in direct competition with male students. On one hand, this could be seen as the teacher attempting to help the students by giving them the best chance possible to attend a prestigious university. However, the message conveyed could also imply that the girls are not intelligent enough to enter into entrance exam competition with men and so should avoid it, which could be a catalyst for fear of success (Horner, 1972; Nagatomo, 2012). This tension is similar to the case of Alexandra (Motha, 2005), a teacher who attempted to critique mainstream conceptions of beauty by proclaiming her students' unique features, such as a nose that is *pointy* and *sticks out*, as being equally as beautiful as a conventionally beautiful nose. However, by drawing attention to the discrepancy, Alexandra only highlighted the gap between the students features and conventionally beautiful features. In both the case of the teacher mentioned in the student discussions and Alexandra, a teacher who was trying to do something constructive for their students inadvertently conveyed a message that supported the very opinion that they were trying to combat.

CONCLUSION

The present study presented a case study of the English discussion center at a private university in central Tokyo. The lessons of two instructors from the center were observed and followed up with formal interviews to investigate the role of gender on student interaction in English discussion classes. The findings from the observations and interviews were triangulated with a set of 23 recordings, which involved a total of 61 students engaged in 16-minute discussions on the topic of gender in Japanese society.

The results of analytic coding on the observation logs, interview transcriptions, and student discussion logs were never going to answer the research questions conclusively but did offer some interesting results. The data suggested that the female students in the discussion recordings were less likely to directly challenge male students, particularly male students who occupied the alpha role in the discussion. This behavior was not only an example of how gender influenced interaction but was also an example of how student perspectives on gender manifested themselves in the discussion lessons, because overall the students seemed to acknowledge a difference between men and women in Japanese society. The existence of this attitude could be seen as a manifestation of the students' parents' beliefs in gender inequality, which seems to be perpetuated through the students. However, these conclusions are based upon a small sample of data and require reinforcement from a larger sample. To this end, more observations, instructor interviews, and student recordings on gender and other topics are required before the results can be considered transferable or dependable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

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